

# **Society spatial inscription and representations of the places of the medina of Tunis : Pedagogical experience**

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## **Introduction**

Through the educational experience of the "seminar of representation", which is an annual event dedicated to students of the first year architecture at ENAU, this article attempts to explain the pedagogical approach taken to approach the societal relationship to the space of the medina of Tunis and to assist the students in the understanding of this articulation by means of their spatial experiences.

The purpose of this article is on the genesis of the idea of the seminar "session 2017-2018", its theoretical foundations and its spatial projections in terms of pedagogical approach adopted and organization of this annual event in the space of the medina. It will present this pedagogical experience relating to the connection between the place "support of study", presented in terms of spatial structure, and the projected educational event.

As we believe in the correlation between research work and adopted pedagogical approaches, we tried during this educational experiment to test pedagogical tools relative to our scientific positioning. Our main hypothesis postulates that the significant value of the different spatial configurations can not be approximated without resorting to the system of construction of the underlying meaning. Different questions helped to guide the reflection before the seminar "session 2017-2018", and determined our educational orientation, we quote them below:

- How to accompany the first year architecture student to grasp the importance of the underlying system of meanings and social representations, which is at the genesis of the spatial configuration of the place "study support"?
- How to approach pedagogically, a place relative to its spatial structure and relative to a thematic kernel <sup>1</sup>, that we have detected its relevance at the level of the reading of the different spatial configurations.
- How to organize this educational event in space and time to ensure that students are immersed in the places so that they can grasp the correlation between social and spatial dimensions.

## **1. Presentation of the seminar of representation**

The seminar of representation is a moment of exchange and contribution between the students and the teachers of the different disciplines, it was launched for the first time during the 2013-2014 academic year.

Indeed, the National School of Architecture and Urbanism is moving towards the introduction of this pedagogical tradition through various sessions that have focused on different themes in order to introduce new students to architecture, considered as a multidisciplinary field. This initiation is done through the representation, defined as a transcription of information and sensations collected to communicate an experience and a personal interpretation.

The 2017-2018 session, organized from February 20 to 24, 2018, took as its study support the emblematic place of "the medina of Tunis". On the occasion of this session, we proposed to students to question the different places of the medina of Tunis through the notion of "openness" which can not be reduced to a single meaning. Students were asked to immerse themselves in the place visited and to represent it by transcribing the understanding of the notion of openness, consideration given to the underlying social actions and practices.

The organization of the seminar of representation was studied by the committee of the seminar<sup>2</sup> to ensure a complete immersion in the places of the medina of Tunis. First-year students (whose number was 240 ) were thus called to live a personal experience in these places to finally propose a "representation" on a two-dimensional support allowing the transcription of their own understanding of the notion of openness. The requested work is supported by references to the historical, sociological and iconographic data collected.

## **2. The theoretical foundations of educational experience: reflections upstream of the seminar**

On the occasion of our previous research (Sellem, 2017), we examined a thematic kernel (centrality, orientation, hierarchy and unity) allowing the symbolic function, that we have tried to confront the different spatial interpretations relating to different systems of construction of meaning. It appears from this work that this thematic kernel has been invested by the Muslim religion to spatially project the meaning of the sacred. Indeed, the medina of Tunis presents a hidden order which seemed at first confused, if one does not take into consideration the system of construction of underlying meaning. We have tried in our research to reveal the semantic dimension of this hidden order detected at the level of different spatial configurations and at different scales. This was done in connection with Islam which determined the social code of spatial inscription of society at a certain historical period.

The centrality of the mosque was correlative to its territorial centrality, as well as its openness to the different aspects of social life. Indeed, this Great Mosque had oriented the inscription of society in space in reference to the Muslim religion and relative to its own construction of the meaning of sacred.

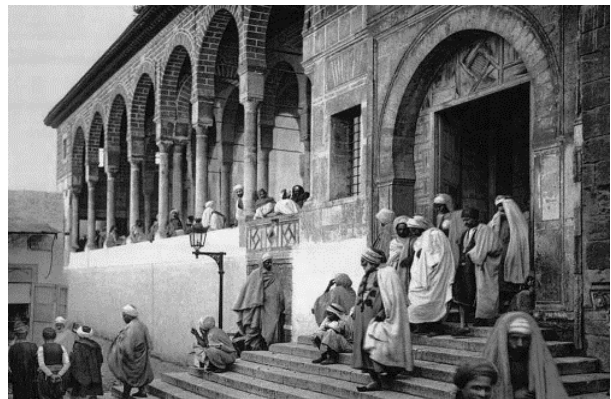


Fig. 1 : Photo of the Great Mosque Ezzitouna in 1899  
([https://upload.wikimedia.org/ Tunis\\_mosque\\_1899.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/Tunis_mosque_1899.jpg))

Thus, the historic site of the medina of Tunis is organized around the Great Mosque Ezzitouna, an emblematic and representative place of Islam. Indeed, the Great Mosque Ezzitouna was one of the most prestigious centers of legal-religious education in the Maghreb countries. It is a university mosque and intellectual core recognized in the Muslim world until the nineteenth century, located in the heart of a network of streets and organizing various souks and places of teachings "madrassa".

In other words, Islam as a system of construction of meaning had determined the spatial projections of society and the code determining its writing at the same time as its reading through space. It is in this sense that we postulate that the thematic kernel of meaning presented is involved in understanding the association between the plane of expression (the spatial configuration of the Tunisian medina) and the content plane (the system construction of meaning: the Muslim religion). Through this seminar of representation, and relative to the establishment of the Ezzitouna Grand Mosque in the heart of the medina of Tunis, we wanted to approach the semantic investment of directions and orientations spatially projected in the medina of Tunis through the notion of "openness" : the openings ensuring the horizontal crossing (door, window, street and course) and the vertical openings allowing the communication with the sky (open patio and places).

Indeed, the representations of the top and the bottom, the horizontal and the vertical constitute the spiritual background invested by different religious conceptions relative to the relation between God and men.

### 3. Structure of the medina of Tunis and spatial interpretations of the thematic kernel

Historically, the medina of Tunis was delimited by an enclosure, having an irregular shape. The passages were organized through doors in its ramparts, reflecting an introversion and a centrality folded back on itself, which we find transposed on different scales. This configuration makes it possible to present the medina of Tunis as a unified space entity. Similarly, the Tunisian house, is a patio house that opens inside. It has a chicane entrance to preserve its privacy and manage the physical and visual crossing from the outside to the inside.



Fig. 2 : Different angles of view of the minaret of the Great Mosque Ezzitouna  
The minaret orientation figure in the medina of Tunis (Author, 2018)

Indeed, at different scales, the organization of the medina is governed by community values that emanate from the Muslim religion, which provides the code of spatial inscription. The preservation of intimacy, solidarity and equality between all Muslims, are values that previously governed Muslim society. These values are spatially translated by the introversion of houses which now have interior facades concentrating all the wealth without ever doing anything appear outside, and by a dense and continuous fabric which is gradually offered to the visitor, who must respect the social code of crossing.

The sense of discovery necessarily accompanies visitors wandering in narrow and winding streets without ever offering a direct view to their destination or to one of the interiors whose accessibility is carefully filtered. In this dense tissue, in which one can easily get lost, a figure of orientation seems unavoidable and derogates from the horizontal extent of this urban fabric, it is the minaret of the Great Mosque Ezzitouna. Indeed, the territorial centrality of the Great Mosque Ezzitouna gives the minaret a function of visual cue in this urban fabric, characterized by its horizontality. Its vertical slenderness marks the vertical direction and affirms the semantic investment of height.

Indeed, the medina of Tunis is organized around this Great Mosque, which is the largest community mosque and also a center of convergence of different courses in the medina of Tunis. It occupies "the center of the medina of Tunis" and it projects by the same the central dimension of the Muslim religion, which had directed at a certain time all the aspects of the life of the inhabitants of the medina of Tunis and the social practices to different scales. According to this religion, any action in terms of spatio-temporal experience will have to be regulated by religion. The projection of a hierarchical and radio concentric organization of the districts of the medina of Tunis is relative to the relation of proximity to the Great Mosque. Speaking of the neighboring souks, this relationship of proximity is correlative to the degree of purity and nobility of the corporation: the cleanest is the closest to the mosque. The hierarchy is thus territorial and external to the mosque as an edifice, it is linked to socio-economic practices and it determines an order of implantation by evoking the idea of a space whose value is higher than another space in relation to its degree of purity.

#### **4. The topological and projective values of the Great Mosque: spatial inscription**

The Great Mosque is located on the crossing of two major thoroughfares crossing the entire medina ensuring its strategic location, its centrality and accessibility; the first connects the "kasbah" at the « porte de France » through "la rue Jammā Ezzitouna ", and the second is determined by "la rue du Pacha" and "la rue de Torbet el bey" (see fig. 3 and fig. 4). The mosque is accessible from all four sides thanks to nine accesses distributed along the four exterior facades of the building. The strong accessibility of the mosque and its opening on the surrounding neighborhoods, testify to a territorial report which is part of the spatial continuity of the winding streets of the medina of Tunis.

Indeed, the Great Mosque Ezzitouna is a gathering place of the entire Muslim community in the medina of Tunis on Friday and holidays. Its court "shan" (approximately 2000 m<sup>2</sup> of surface) is the biggest open-air place within the medina of Tunis. The presence of such an open space in the heart of the medina of Tunis contrasts with the dense fabric and narrow streets of this place. The courtyard of the mosque is accessible from different sides of the mosque with its many accesses overlooking the souks surrounding it and it serves the prayer room with fifteen doors.

## 5. Educational approach in correlation with the spatial structure of the Tunis medina

Taking into account the theoretical field that we have previously explored and consideration given to the spatial structure of the medina of Tunis, we opted for a distribution of the medina of Tunis in five study zones : a central zone corresponding to the zone of the Grand Mosque and four zones relating to the location of the mosque on the crossing of two major streets (north-south and east-west) leading to the main gates of the medina of Tunis.

This choice aims at an equitable distribution of the students concerned on five study zones at the same time as the assimilation of the importance of the topological and projective values of the Great Mosque as an institution representative of the Muslem religion.

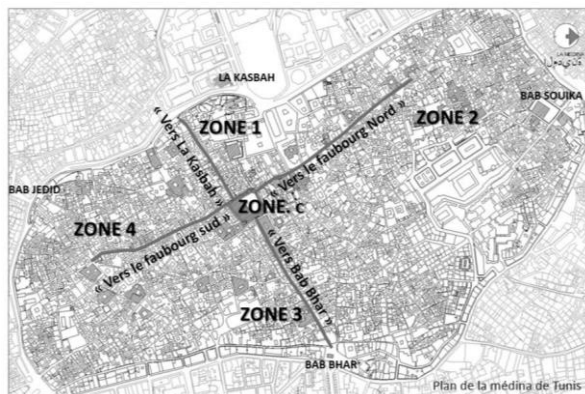


Fig. 3 : the great mosque and the spatial distribution of the medina of Tunis (centrality and orientation) according to a plan of the medina of Tunis realized by l'ASM.

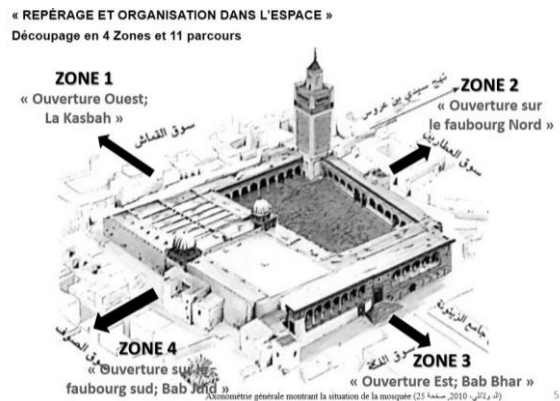


Fig. 4 : Five-zone division  
Basic plan, according to (Doulateli, 2010)

On another scale of study and decomposition, we are interested in the spatial path in the medina as a dynamic configuration allowing the discovery of the medina of Tunis, as well as the various places that allow its punctuation. The street designates the space of path « *la rue désigne l'espace du parcours* » (Djerbi, 2003), it is presented as a spatio-temporal linking, punctuated by different points of reference materialized by the places to visit. Thus, the transition in the path is carried out according to a dynamic, determined by the establishment of places open to the visit along the path.

We consider that the main path is a path that leads from one of the gates of the medina to the Great Mosque. It is punctuated by different equipments and important places. We have decomposed the medina into different paths in relation to the established zones and allowing the discovery of different places and equipments of the medina of Tunis (house, mosque, medressa (place of education), souk, mausoleum, Torba (cemetery of bourgeois family), mosque, barracks, door), that we have indicated through icons on cards<sup>3</sup> made available to students to facilitate their identification.

### - Distribution of the medina of Tunis in ZONES and PATHS

The medina of Tunis - as a support of study - was thus distributed in five zones and 11 paths chosen according to the main ways and the doors "*bab*" most important of the medina. These paths allow the visit of the most important places and equipments of the medina of Tunis. Each Zone is thus divided into paths, allowing the equitable distribution of students both in the places



(which are essentially World Heritage monuments), and in the urban space. For each path, there are 22 students, 4 teachers and a guide<sup>4</sup>.

### **Central zone :**

This is the zone around the Zitouna Grand Mosque. It is defined by the opening of the Great Mosque on its surroundings. It includes places of education "Madrasa" and souks of different corporations. It is divided into three paths: (path 1, path 2 and path 3).

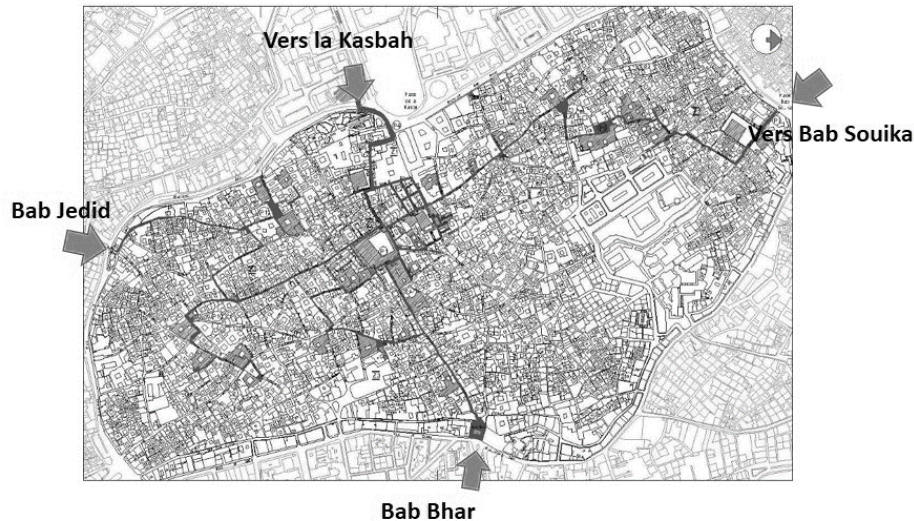


Fig.5 : The medina of Tunis divided into 11 paths. Production of the seminar committee, ENAU (2017-2018) according to a plan of the medina of Tunis realized by l'ASM.

### **Zone 1: Towards the Kasbah "Government Square"**

Zone 1 is determined by the opening of the medina of Tunis on the west and on the Kasbah (Government Square). It revolves around "souk el Kmach" and "souk el bey". It is punctuated by different monuments representative of different historical epochs : Zaouia sidi Ben Arous, mosque Youssef Dey, medresa Chamaya ... to the mosque El Kasbah. This zone is reduced to a single path : (path 4).

The places accessible along this path are: two mosques, a cemetery "torba", a souk, a mausoleum, a "midha" (space for ablutions) and a "medressa" (a place of instruction).

### **Zone 2 : Towards the northern suburb « Bab Souika »**

This zone is determined by the opening of the medina of Tunis on the northern suburb; "Bab Souika"<sup>5</sup>. It revolves around « Sidi Ben Arous Street » to « Sidi Mehrez Street » and Bab Souika Square. This zone is punctuated by different places, as well as by the presence of different monuments: Dar Lasram "headquarters of the Safeguard Association of the Medina of Tunis: ASM", Kheireddine Palace, Dar El-Mestiri, Mosque Mhamed Bey and Zaouia Sidi Mehrez. It is divided into 3 paths : (path 5, path 6 and path 7).

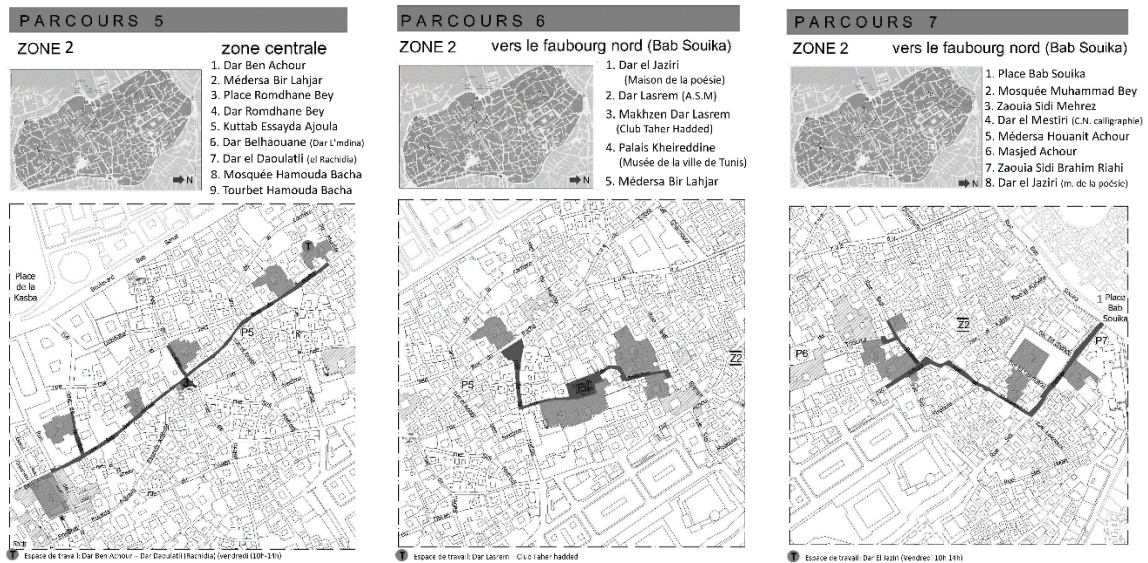


Fig. 6 : Implantation of places to visit along paths 5,6 and 7. Production of the seminar committee, ENAU (2017-2018) According to a plan of the medina of Tunis realized by the ASM

### Zone 3: Eastward "Bab Bhar"

Zone 3 is determined by the opening of the medina of Tunis on the East and the colonial city through "Bab bhar", also called "Porte de France". It focuses on the main street « Rue Jamaa Zitouna » to the Victory Square and the door of France « porte de France ».

It also includes the street Sidi Ali Azouz. This zone is punctuated by the presence of various accessible monuments: Dar Bach Hamba, barracks Sidi Ameur ... It is decomposed into two paths: (path 8, path 9).

### Zone 4: Towards the southern suburb "Bab Jedid"

Zone 4 is determined by the opening of the medina of Tunis on the southern suburb by means of "Bab Jedid". It revolves around "Torbet el Bey street" and integrates "Andalusian street" and the castle square to "Bab Jedid". This zone is punctuated by various monuments: Dar Hussein "headquarters of the INP", Dar Haddad, El Kassr mosque, Torbet el Bey, Mesjed El Kobbba .... It is divided into two paths : (path 10 and path 11).

## 6. interrogate the places of the medina through the notion of openness

The Openness could be approached in many ways and at different scales. This notion has even oriented the objective of the work of the committee of the seminar of representation, which tried to make accessible the closed places and left to the abundant of the medina of Tunis by making them accessible to the students. Different administrative procedures have been initiated to achieve these ends. The objective was to revive and open to discovery, closed, disused and meaningful places. The opening of these places to visit, is in order to transpose the different spatial experiences through representation. On the occasion of the seminar, the National School of Architecture and Urban Planning moved to the medina of Tunis to interact with its components. Openness as a notion is outmoded in favor of an attitude, an approach and an objective of the seminar. The opening is also an opening on the history of an era and its social experience. the study of this notion allowed the participation of various stakeholders and social actors in the seminar.

## 7. Spatio-temporal organization of the seminar

The spatio-temporal organization of the seminary has been thought in correlation with the spatial structure of the medina. The first place visited in the medina of Tunis is the Ezzitouna Grand Mosque, which was the gathering place for all participants in the seminar (students, teachers and various stakeholders). This place also presents a first necessary moment of identification and organization in space. In fact, the grouping was done in the "shan" courtyard of the Grand Mosque according to the 11 groups of students identified according to the 11 paths, supports of studies. The organization and spatial distribution of students are determined by the geographical orientation of the study zones (East, West, North and South) (see fig.7).

After regrouping at the Ezzitouna Grand Mosque, guided tours are organized on the same day by course and group. Students then discover the accessible places of the different paths, this discovery is accompanied by historical, social and iconographic data provided to students by various means.

The work and demonstration workshops are also organized in specific places in the medina of Tunis, to familiarize students with the different "modes of representation".

The organization plan of the students in the courtyard area of the Great Mosque by zones and by paths is also the evacuation plan according to the orientation of the different paths and according to the different accesses of the mosque.

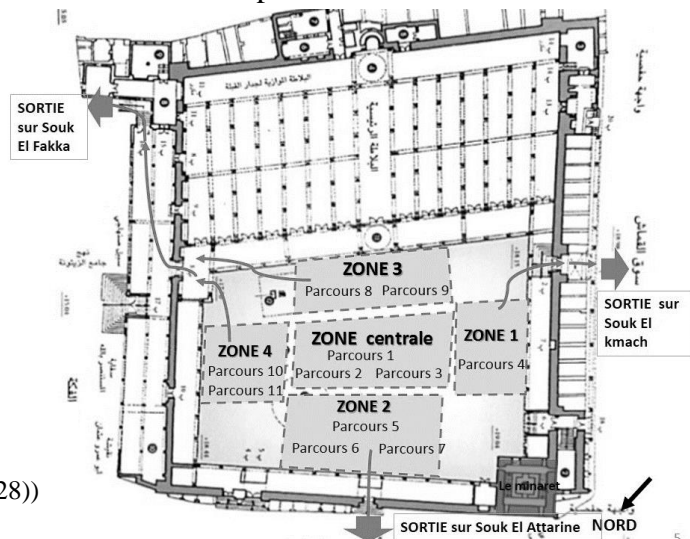


Fig. 7 : Space organization of students in the courtyard of the Great Mosque (author, 2017)  
Basic plan (according to : (Doulateli, 2010, p.28))

## 8. Interpretations of the notion of OPENNESS

After an impregnation of the places visited and by referring to the historical, sociological and iconographic data collected, the students produced different representations of the places and its various components in order to transcribe their understandings of the notion of openness, consideration given to the underlying social practices.

- The openness has been approached in many ways and at different scales: Openness to the other "stranger", putting in the center the relationship between the inside and the outside, in relation to what is seen and what is hidden, what is accessible and what is not
- The gradual opening of the streets of the medina punctuated by squares.
- The opening as a space device "entrance, portals, doors (houses of the medina, souks organized by corporation ...), windows, patios, terraces, squares,...", but also as a filtering device for the air, the sun and the light, elements at the base of every vital exchange ...





Fig. 8 : Some works by students transcribing their spatial experiences of places and their interpretations of the notion of openness (ENAU, 2018)

The transcription of the experience of the opening of the different places, was made by varying the scales and points of view, through various modes of representation: geometric drawing, sketching, perspective drawing, photos, diagrams, comments, annotations, etc.

The students used various techniques: the superposition and the juxtaposition of representation of different scales: scale of the medina, scale of the district, scale of the residence, scale of the dead end, scale of the door ....

The sketches reflecting a personal and instant perception of the place are completed by schematizations which are abstract representations, conventional and analytical representations communicating the dimension of time by questioning space on the different actions of social practice. Different scenarios have been represented such as: entering a house, seeing without being seen, exploiting the patio space according to the time, the orientation and the course of the sun, entering the medina, strolling in the medina,...

work of students have demonstrated a diversity of interpretations and representations taking into account the correlation between space and social practices related.

## CONCLUSION

The architectural space is the place of projection and concretization of collective representations, conveying meaning relative to a symbolic system (Rénier, 1981). It is this symbolic system that provided the social code of inscription in space. We tried to test the scope of a thematic kernel allowing the symbolic function, in the pedagogical approach of a place, considering its spatial structure. The decomposition of the medina of Tunis, in zones and paths, is based on the spatial interpretation of the four themes (centrality, orientation, hierarchy and unity) invested semantically, and relative to the topological and projective values of the Great mosque as representative institution of Islam.

Approaching the medina of Tunis through the notion of "openness" may seem paradoxical, given the nature of the configuration of the medial tissue, nevertheless the opening is managed by a code at the base of social practices which, according to Alain Rénier (1998), are still present

in the visible and in the physics of the construct. The Accessibility - both visual and physical - to different places is determined by the social code, which governed the spatial inscription of society at a characteristic moment of its formation in correlation with the impregnation of Islam.

The decomposition of the study support and the spatio-temporal organization of the seminar were studied in correlation with the structure of the medina and the social code thereon. This seminar was an opportunity to reflect on the distribution of students in the medina of Tunis, and on the identification and reading of different places related to social practices. An educational approach was structured to interrogate the medina of Tunis on the spatial inscription of society through the notion of "openness". The students' responses are representations of lived experiences, following an immersion in the places of the medina of Tunis. They show the polysemous nature of this notion and its relevance in the study of the relationship between the social and the spatial.

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<sup>1</sup> It is a kernel composed of four themes (centrality, orientation, hierarchy and unity), which are both conceptual and figurative "geometric". Their figurative aspect has been largely exploited by symbolism. The theme is an element of content that is intelligible and not perceptible, but it has different sensitive manifestations that make up figures.

<sup>2</sup> The committee of the seminar "session 2017-2018" is formed by teachers of ENAU (architects and artists), presented according to an alphabetical order: Alia bel Hadj Hamouda, Faiza Bouricha, Férida Sellem, Mona Fakhfakh, Narjess Abdelghani, Neila Larbi, Hajer Bel Hadj, Hajer Fakhfakh, Samia Gallouzi.

<sup>3</sup> Various documents are provided to the students (maps and textual documents produced by the seminar committee) to facilitate their reading of the space of the medina of Tunis.

<sup>4</sup> Person specialized in history, sociology or anthropology, to provide data of different orders.

<sup>5</sup> The northern suburb of the medina is called "Bab Souika". "Bab" in Arabic means door.